

# Policy Report

## Special Issue

*Highly Skilled Migration to the Gulf States:  
How Do GCC Countries Fare in the Global  
Competition for Talent?*

No.7

# Assets on the Move

## Highly Skilled Migration from the Philippines to the Gulf

Jorge Tigno and Geoffrey M. Ducanes

### Executive Summary

The countries comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are host to a significant number of highly skilled workers from the Philippines. While overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in the GCC are predominantly made up of low-skilled labourers, particularly in domestic work, high-skilled migration from the Philippines to the region merits serious attention as receiving countries take steps to entice more of them to live and work there. The share of Filipino high-skilled professionals in the GCC is roughly half the total stock of all highly skilled Filipinos worldwide.

What are the sentiments of highly skilled Filipinos towards moving to the Gulf? What factors matter in their choice of destination? While the Gulf is a prominent destination for the highly skilled, there are also those Filipinos who prefer migrating to North America, drawn by higher incomes and more secure residency pathways. Likewise, the average income for skilled OFWs in the Gulf is about half of what similar professionals can earn in North America, diminishing the GCC's appeal among those aiming for better long-term economic prospects.

Although the Philippines has developed bilateral labour agreements (BLAs) with various GCC states as channels for high-skilled labour recruitment, these agreements are primarily tailored to specific sectors, such as healthcare, and seldom cover a broader range of skilled professions. As a result, many highly skilled Filipinos view the Gulf as a temporary step within a broader "stepwise migration" strategy, using the region to gain experience and save resources before moving on to more desirable Western countries. Gulf-based programmes, such as the Golden and Freelance visas, aim to attract skilled talent appeal largely to those seeking temporary or regional employment opportunities rather than those seeking permanent relocation.

High-skilled labour migration from the Philippines to the GCC is largely a win-win arrangement. For the GCC to retain more skilled Filipino professionals, policies that offer competitive pay, career growth, and residency stability with family reunification are essential. However, the continued attractiveness of North America can also impact professional migrants' desire to stay in the region for the long term. Likewise, offering these incentives to Filipinos with skilled talents can also create significant challenges for receiving societies, particularly around future concerns from locals in terms of social integration and community cohesion. Meanwhile, the Philippines faces challenges in managing the ongoing outflow of skilled labour, which contributes to a growing "brain drain" and strains the availability of talent needed for domestic economic growth.

## Highly Skilled Filipino Workers and the Gulf

The countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have consistently been top destinations for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) of all skill types. From just 15,000 in the late 1970s<sup>1</sup>, Filipino labour migration to the Gulf has grown exponentially over the decades. By 1990, there were no less than 400,000 OFWs in the region, and by 2020, the total stock of Filipino migrants in the GCC had increased fourfold to over 1.6 million or roughly 30 percent of the world's total stock of Filipino migrants. The Philippines is a major producer of high-skilled workers both for its domestic as well as the global labour market, especially the Gulf. These skilled workers are highly sought after and are particularly concentrated in the GCC. The share of Filipino high-skilled professionals in the region is roughly half the total stock of all highly skilled Filipinos worldwide.

Historically, contract labour migration to the GCC has been predominantly comprised of low-skilled Filipino workers. In the beginning, OFWs in the region were largely made up of males employed in construction work. By the 1990s, a shift took place in which females now dominated, particularly in domestic service. Altogether, the employment of low-skilled workers was largely managed under a restrictive sponsorship system where many migrants have had to endure maltreatment and exploitation at the hands of their employers. Much has been said about the extent of the challenges faced by low-skilled labour migrants in the Gulf, especially the Filipino migrant domestic workers<sup>2</sup>. However, the sizeable and growing presence of highly skilled Filipino workers in the region merits deeper examination and analysis. Workers with advanced skill sets are an invaluable asset to any country. Many countries, including those in the GCC, are showing a strong interest in attracting skilled migrants. In contrast to restrictive policies towards low-skilled migrant labour, receiving countries are modifying and relaxing their labour and immigration policies to attract more of the highly skilled including offers of long-term residency as well as high remuneration.

## Aspiration and Reality Among High-Skilled Filipinos

What are the sentiments of highly skilled Filipinos towards moving to the Gulf? Around one in five Filipinos dream of living and working abroad<sup>3</sup> although there are nuances to be noted especially concerning education, occupation, and desired destinations. Among those who were at least college graduates in the Philippines, only 10 percent said they planned to move to the GCC countries, while 24 percent said they planned to move to North America<sup>4</sup>. At the other extreme, 16 percent of those whose highest level of education is high school<sup>5</sup> planned to go to the Gulf while only 11 percent said they planned to go to North America.

Likewise, the Gulf is seen as a relatively less preferred destination among those who currently possess high-skill employment, according to data culled from the 2018 National Migration Survey (NMS)<sup>6</sup>. In general, more Filipinos say they intend to move to North America than the GCC. Around 17 percent of those with high-skill occupations and who are 15-60 years old (and slightly less at 12 percent for those 15-30 years old) signified an intention to move to the Gulf while a much higher proportion (42 percent) of those with high skill occupations chose North America (see Table 1). Thus, highly skilled workers from the Philippines are around 2.5 times more likely to prefer to move to North America over the GCC and over three times more likely if they were younger. This is not surprising given the consistently strong historical, economic, political, and cultural ties that the Philippines has with the West, in general, and with the US, in particular. Meanwhile, those in low-skill occupations are around 1.5 times more likely to choose the GCC as their preferred destination.

Assets on the Move: Highly Skilled Migration from the Philippines to the Gulf

**Table 1. Destination country/region of choice by those with intention to migrate in the next five years**

Region	15-60-year-olds			15-30-year-olds only		
	Low Skill %	High Skill %	Total Number (100%)	Low Skill %	High Skill %	Total Number (100%)
<b>GCC</b>	82.8	17.2	212,681	87.9	12.1	108,904
<b>North America</b>	58.0	42.0	271,363	57.7	42.3	129,281
<b>Western Europe and UK</b>	79.2	20.8	31,568	56.6	43.4	9,366
<b>Australia and New Zealand</b>	47.7	52.4	69,492	30.3	69.7	35,384
<b>Other country identified</b>	78.1	21.9	200,312	85.8	14.2	106,143
<b>Other country undecided</b>	77.8	22.2	830,668	73.5	26.5	429,114
<b>All destinations</b>	73.9	26.1	1,616,084	72.4	27.6	818,192

Source: Authors' computations using the 2018 NMS.

However, the aspiration to migrate among Filipinos renders only one side of the story. The reality is more complicated. Around half of all Filipinos that leave the country each year actually end up working in one of the GCC countries. It is also important to note as well that the share of highly skilled OFWs in the Gulf region has not increased significantly in the last few years especially when compared with North America, Europe, and Australia (Table 2). The share of high-skilled OFWs in the Gulf seems to be slowly declining from 13.8 percent (2007) to 12 percent (2017) to 9 percent (2022) although this may be attributable to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 2. Overseas Filipino Workers by Destination Region and Skill Level**

Region	2022			2017			2007		
	Low Skill	High Skill	Total Number (100%)	Low Skill	High Skill	Total Number (100%)	Low Skill	High Skill	Total Number (100%)
<b>GCC</b>	86.6	13.4	1,123,701	82.7	17.3	1,318,185	80.3	19.7	764,019
<b>North America*</b>	81.5	18.5	135,712	85.2	14.8	143,369	74.3	25.8	194,112
<b>Europe</b>	87.1	12.9	167,026	93.7	6.3	154,075	82.4	17.6	175,890
<b>Australia</b>	74.7	25.3	55,476	85.7	14.3	41,400	72.3	27.7	31,344
<b>Other country identified</b>	88.4	11.6	711,444	89.6	10.4	846,243	84.3	15.7	768,406

Assets on the Move: Highly Skilled Migration from the Philippines to the Gulf

<b>All destinations</b>	86.6	13.4	2,193,359	85.9	14.1	2,503,272	81.4	18.6	1,933,771
-------------------------	------	------	-----------	------	------	-----------	------	------	-----------

Source: Authors' computations using the various rounds of the Survey of Overseas Filipinos (SOF)

\*The SOF specified North and South America although, realistically, this refers primarily to North America.

What factors matter in Filipinos' choice of destination? One possible reason for the gradual decline in the proportion of highly skilled workers in the GCC may be found in the differential income of OFWs. The average income reported by Filipino migrants in the GCC countries is generally lower compared to other destination regions for both low and high skills. In the case of high-skill workers in the GCC in 2022, their reported monthly income averaged approximately half the mean income of similar workers in North America and Europe (Table 3).

**Table 3. Monthly income of OFWS by skill level and destination region (in Philippine pesos)**

2022 Region	Mean			Median		
	Low Skill	High Skill	Total	Low Skill	High Skill	Total
<b>GCC</b>	25,085	54,368	29,020	21,000	40,000	22,000
<b>North and South America</b>	60,305	100,674	67,758	50,000	60,000	50,400
<b>Europe</b>	59,264	98,021	64,267	50,000	80,000	50,000
<b>Australia</b>	54,623	62,900	56,713	40,000	60,000	40,002
<b>Other country identified</b>	35,755	57,622	38,300	29,000	35,000	30,000
<b>Total</b>	33,933	62,826	37,812	25,000	45,000	26,000

Source: Authors' computations using the 2022 Survey of Overseas Filipinos

Note: In 2022, the average peso-dollar exchange rate was Php54.5:\$1.

Other likely factors can include the presence of a network of private recruitment agencies that actively recruit as well as facilitate the entry of Filipino migrants into the region<sup>7</sup>. The growth of the private recruitment industry has no doubt been encouraged by the demand for jobs in the region. The private recruitment sector has long been the cornerstone of the Philippine overseas employment programme<sup>8</sup> along with established government mechanisms for protecting Filipino migrants in the region<sup>9</sup>. Since migration to the Gulf has been taking place over several decades, it is not surprising to find a stable and thriving migrant community that can also prompt many Filipinos to choose to work there more than elsewhere<sup>10</sup>. Finally, the higher wages offered by Gulf employers relative to Philippine wage rates are also a critical factor in the choice of destination.

### Philippine Labour Agreements and Highly Skilled Filipinos

Bilateral agreements with host countries further strengthen protection by formalising commitments to safeguard the rights and welfare of OFWs, addressing issues like contract enforcement, working conditions, and dispute resolution. A study by Nathan R. Blank<sup>11</sup> of Philippine bilateral labour

---

Assets on the Move: Highly Skilled Migration from the Philippines to the Gulf

agreements (BLAs) with Canada, Japan, Korea, Bahrain, and the UAE noted that while such agreements emphasise attracting highly skilled labour, they tend to be limited to specific sectors (particularly nurses in the cases of Japan and Bahrain) or may apply to numerous job categories but lack procedures for sustaining the cooperation (as with Canada) or merely reiterate basic rights already enshrined in many international documents and conventions (as with UAE and Korea).

A review of Philippine BLAs by Mangulabnan and Daquio<sup>12</sup> found that, as of October 2018, the country had a total of 43 BLAs worldwide, 65 percent of which were non-legally binding. Of the total number of BLAs, 19 were with countries in the Middle East, 11 were informal, non-legally binding arrangements and most pertained to protecting and promoting the rights and welfare specifically of Filipino migrant domestic workers including provisions on their recruitment and repatriation. Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain have signed agreements with the Philippines instituting protocols on the recruitment of skilled Filipino workers although this relates specifically to the hiring of nurses and related healthcare professionals. Oman did not have a BLA with the Philippines as of 2018.

### **Stepwise Migration Among Highly Skilled Filipinos**

In general, stepwise migration<sup>13</sup> from the Gulf is more likely to be undertaken by high-skilled than low-skilled migrants<sup>14 15</sup>. In her study of stepwise Filipino migrant nurses in Singapore, UAE, Australia, and Japan, Maria Reinaruth D. Carlos<sup>16</sup> found that some have had previous work outside the Philippines with Saudi Arabia being the most popular transit destination. She further notes that multiculturalism policies impact on the migrant nurses' stepwise migration decisions with the US and Australia being the most common final destinations.

The UK and Ireland were particularly crucial as desirable destinations for the migrants since gaining a passport from those places gave the nurses a greater advantage once they move to the Gulf in terms of negotiating with their employers for their job position and salary compared to migrating directly from the Philippines<sup>17</sup>.

Facilitated processing at an affordable cost contributed to the popularity of Saudi Arabia as an initial destination. Likewise, the popularity of Saudi Arabia as an initial migration destination can also be attributed to the wide availability of contracts in the healthcare sector, making it a feasible choice for nurses seeking overseas experience. Additionally, working in the Gulf often allows these high-skilled professionals to accumulate savings and establish international networks, both of which are essential for further migration to Western countries.

### **Policy Implications**

It can be observed that the Philippine policy framework on labour migration, under which highly skilled workers fall, largely emphasises the state's role in monitoring overall labour outflows but with the added primary goal of protecting the welfare of low-skilled migrants. This is certainly commendable but can have serious implications with respect to high-skilled professionals from the Philippines as it glosses over the differences in status between highly skilled and low-skilled migrants. High-skilled workers are an asset wherever they are while low-skilled migrants are seen as largely replaceable.

Receiving countries in the region may need to recalibrate their policy to attract foreign skilled talents. Formal agreements with sending countries like the Philippines should move away from ones that target a specific (albeit momentary) need (like healthcare providers) towards ones that accommodate

---

Assets on the Move: Highly Skilled Migration from the Philippines to the Gulf

professional and skilled talents in general. More importantly, GCC countries may wish to consider embarking on agreements with the Philippines to provide scholarships to deserving Filipinos under selected degree programmes and once they graduate, to facilitate or prioritise their entry and employment into the region as skilled workers.

Professionals from the Philippines may find the current facilitated mobility schemes in the region targeting the highly skilled (e.g., Golden and Freelance visas) attractive, although this is more likely to appeal to those who wish to remain largely within the region including those who can resettle with their families. However, it may not be enough of an incentive for highly skilled Filipinos intent on eventually reaching their final desired destination in the West, where a more permanent type of immigrant integration is possible.

Finally, the outflows of skilled labour can exacerbate the Philippines' brain drain problem as more experienced professionals leave the country in the midst of historically low unemployment levels<sup>18</sup>. A substantial reduction in the number and quality of skilled labour domestically available can pose a strategic economic challenge for the country, especially if such vacancies cannot be filled in fast enough by those left behind.

## Endnotes

- 
- 1 Abella, Manolo I. *Export of Filipino Manpower*. Institute of Labor and Manpower Studies, 1979.
  - 2 Parreñas, Rhacel 2015: *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*, Second Edition. Stanford University Press.
  - 3 Social Weather Stations (SWS) 2023: 7 percent Filipino households have an OFW; Most (75 percent) reported that their household OFWs send/give money often, Social Weather Report, 19/04/2023, in: <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20230419092946>
  - 4 Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) 2019: *National Migration Survey 2018*, PSA and UP Population Institute.
  - 5 *Prior to 2012, basic (pre-university) education in the Philippines followed a 10-year system comprising six years of elementary education and four years of high school and which was considered one of the shortest education cycles in East Asia see:*  
  
De Guzman, Alan B. 2003: *The Dynamics of Educational Reforms in the Philippine Basic and Higher Education Sectors*, in: *Asia Pacific Education Review* 4: 1, pp- 39-50.
  - 6 The NMS was a nationwide survey conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA). It gathered information on households and their members as well as those with either internal or international migration experience (not necessarily for labour). Respondents were asked about their plans to move/reside in another country in the next five years.

- 
- 7 There are currently around 3,700 recruitment agencies in the records of the Department of Migrant Workers, many of these are licensed to recruit workers to the GCC countries.
  - 8 Martin, Philip / Abella, Manolo / Midgley, Elizabeth 2004: "Best Practices to Manage Migration: The Philippines", in: *International Migration Review*, 38: 4, pp. 1544–1559
  - 9 Ruiz, Neil G. 2020: "The Rise of the Philippine Emigration State: Protecting Migrant Workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries", in: Rajan, S. Irudaya and Oommen, Ginu Zacharia (eds.): *Asianization of Migrant Workers in the Gulf Countries*, Singapore, pp. 127–149
  - 10 Hosoda, Naomi 2020: "Survival Strategies and Migrant Communities in the Arab Gulf States: A Case of Filipino Workers in the UAE", in: Ishii, Masako, Hosoda, Naomi, Matsuo, Masaki, and Horinuki, Koji (eds.): *Asian Migrant Workers in the Arab Gulf States*, Leiden, The Netherlands, pp. 172–193
  - 11 Blank, Nathan 2011: *Making Migration Policy: Reflections on the Philippines' Bilateral Labor Agreements*, in: *Asian Politics and Policy* 3: 2, pp. 185 – 205.
  - 12 Mangulabnan, Bernard Paul M. / Daquio, Carl Rookie O. 2019: *A Review of Bilateral Labor Agreements Concluded by the Philippines with Countries of Destination: Toward a Framework for Monitoring and Evaluation*, in: *Philippine Journal of Labor Studies* 1: 1, pp. 1 – 38.
  - 13 *Stepwise migration refers to a gradual process where migrants move in stages, often starting with local or regional moves before reaching their final destination. At each step, they may acquire skills, resources, or adaptation experience that facilitates further migration. Stepwise migration suggests migrants have preconceived trajectories of where they eventually wish to be as their final destination, see:*  
  
Valenta, Marko 2022: *Itinerant labor: conceptualizing circular, serial, and stepwise migrations to the Arab Gulf and onwards*, in: *Migration and Development* 11: 3, pp. 674 – 696
  - 14 Valenta, Marko 2022: *Itinerant labor: conceptualizing circular, serial, and stepwise migrations to the Arab Gulf and onwards*, in: *Migration and Development* 11: 3, pp. 674 – 696
  - 15 Paul, Anju Mary 2011: "Stepwise international migration: A multistage migration pattern for the aspiring migrant", in: *American Journal of Sociology*, 116: 6, pp. 184–188.
  - 16 Carlos, Maria Reinaruth D. 2014: *Multiculturalism Policies and the Stepwise International Migration of Filipino Nurses: Implications for Japan*, in: Shimizu, Kosuke / Bradley, William S. (eds.): *Multiculturalism and Conflict Reconciliation in the Asia*, pp. 168
  - 17 *Ibid*, pp. 162 – 189.
  - 18 The unemployment rate in 2023 averaged 4.4 percent, its lowest rate since 2005.



---

Assets on the Move: Highly Skilled Migration from the Philippines to the Gulf

---

## **Contact**

Philipp Dienstbier  
Director  
Regional Programme Gulf States  
European and International Cooperation  
[philipp.dienstbier@kas.de](mailto:philipp.dienstbier@kas.de)

## **Imprint**

Published by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2025,  
Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany

Assets on the Move: Highly Skilled Migration from the Philippines to the Gulf

---

This publication was published with financial support of the Federal Republic of Germany.

This policy report was written in the framework of joint project with the Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population (GLMM) Programme of the Gulf Research Center (GRC) entitled "Highly Skilled Migration to the Gulf States: How Do GCC Countries Fare in the Global Competition for Talent." This policy paper is part of a set of eight. Each policy paper is based upon a larger research report which is published in a volume as well as separately. All publications can be accessed on the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's (KAS) Regional Programme Gulf States' website [here](#).

This publication of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. is solely intended for information purposes. It may not be used by political parties or by election campaigners or supporters for the purpose of election advertising. This applies to federal, state and local elections as well as elections to the European Parliament.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung or its Regional Programme Gulf States.